Science

G-G-GHOSTS

Scaring up some facts

Exterminator Dan Aykroyd vacuumed up his psychic foes in the movie "Ghostbusters."

A reincarnated Shirley MacLaine discovered her past lives in the television mini-series, "Out on a Limb."

Students statistically tested occurrences of psychic phenomena in the classroom at Oakland University in Rochester.

Which scenario best represents research into the paranormal?

"People who are professional debunkers and people who are gullible believers are at opposite poles, and neither are at all useful to the field of parapsychology," says Richard Brooks, an OU professor of philosophy.

"There are plenty of true believers who believe some of the most absurd nonsense. They usually are quite ignorant of data and have no knowledge of the long history of investigation.

"Science fiction and all that hokey stuff doesn't damage physics and astronomy. They already have their reputation. Parapsychology still is a controversial field, so we don't need that kind of stuff."

THE KIND of "stuff" that Brooks says lends credibility to the field of parapsychology — the study of psychic activity — includes laboratory experiments, statistical studies and interviews.

"There's a whole group of debunkers who say the whole field of parapsychology is irrational and impossible. I'm not interested in people who approach scientific discoveries that way."

Parapsychologists look for two kinds of evidence in their research. They document the results of controlled laboratory experiments, and they analyze anecdotes.

"Debunkers usually say anecdotal material is of little value in science, and yet there have been numerous instances in which anecdotes have led to important scientific discoveries," Brooks noted. "Peasants talked about rocks falling from the skies for years before scientists went out and actually looked.

"Lavoisier, the French scientist, dismissed meteors with one sentence: 'There are no rocks in the sky.'

"Spontaneous cases of psychic activity always have to be treated with a degree of caution, but there's ample laboratory evidence developed in psychic research."

ALTHOUGH THE Society for Psychic Research was founded in 1882, systematic, long-term studies weren't documented until 1930, Brooks said.

Parapsychologists apply the science of probability and statistics to psychic experiments to figure how frequently a paranormal activity may occur by chance.

"If you get results which would not be expected more than 5 percent of the time, that's called a significant experiment. Parapsychologists generally are more conservative. Instead of .05 they look for a 0.2.

"You work out the statistics and say, 'I've got more right than one would expect by chance.' So, something other than chance is operating."

That "something other," may include poltergeists, mental telepathy, clairvoyance or other psychic phenomena.

Mental telepathy, extrasensory perception and clairvoyance are the easiest to test through statistical means. Levitation, materialization, and out-of-body experiences are more difficult.

But at both extremes, psychic experiments — unlike those in the physical sciences — aren't always easily reproduced on demand.

"The human personality is a very complex, delicate mechanism. So many factors — fatigue, interest, belief, personality of the experimenter — enter in, that it's almost impossible to control all of them," he explained.

And experiments that set out to investigate one facet of parapsychology may end up illustrating another.

One University of Virginia professor attempted to document the out-of-body experience by hiding a 10-digit number on the ceiling of a laboratory. The test subject was instructed to float out of her body and find the number.

"We have a great deal of evidence to show that altered states of mind — such as hypnosis or dream states — are psi (psychic) conducive. How do we know the person really went out of body or may have used telepathy?"

BROOKS SUPERVISED student experiments when he taught classes in parapsychology at Oakland several years ago and has experienced psychic phenomena.

The Wisconsin native had encountered stories about the paranormal through his studies of Indian philosophy. But it wasn't until a colleague debunked the idea that Brooks began studying the field.

"I got mad at the arrogance and stupidity of someone who would pass judgment on something they were ignorant of," he recalled.

He's just as critical of fraudulent psychics.

"The mind is so capable of fooling itself. People are interested in something that will make them feel more important and give them special powers that other people don't have. When you get the ego involved, watch out."

Brooks views parapsychology as a device to help understand human nature and to erase the divisions between peoples.

"I think the materialistic world view has a deadening effect on human beings. I also feel that the mindless fundamental religion — and I'm not just talking about fundamental Christians — has a detrimental effect because it pits sect against sect.

"When people begin to see things so exclusively in their own little worlds, it leads to conflict. Parapsychology is one small contribution toward a broader view of mankind. It's going to challenge materialists and fundamentalists both seriously."

Oakland University professor Richard Brooks takes a scientific approach to the study of psychic phenomena — including poltergeists, mental telepathy and clairvoyance.

Bluebird blues

They're low birds in state pecking order

nature

Timothy Nowicki

EASTERN bluebirds, a member of the thrush family, like our robin, spend the winter from southern Ohio south to Florida.

Warm temperatures and the longer days of the second week of March are enough to stimulate bluebirds to migrate north to southeastern Michigan. Some individuals will nest as far north as James Bay in Ontario.

Bluebird numbers in Michigan are down to 10 percent of what they were only 50 years ago. Competition from house sparrows and starlings for limited nesting sites and loss of appropriate habitat have contributed to their decline.

MANY PEOPLE are helping to restore bluebird numbers by providing artificial nesting boxes. Fortunately, bluebirds adapt well to properly placed and constructed nest boxes.

By following a few suggestions, you can contribute to the "Bring Back the Bluebirds!" campaign.

Boxes should be placed in open grassland areas with some scattered trees nearby. To reduce competition with house sparrows, place the box at least 200 yards from buildings.

Competition with starlings can be avoided by making an entrance hole 1⅛ inches in diameter. Place two boxes about 15 feet apart on metal poles about four-six feet above the ground. Metal poles make it more difficult for predators to raid the next box.

TWO BOXES are suggested, because one may be used by tree swallow. That leaves one available for the bluebird.

Tree swallows are great birds to watch too, so do not be discouraged if they begin nesting. If you have enough room for more boxes, put another pair 100 yards from the first pair.

Through the years, a box with a 4-by-4-inch floor and 10-inch-high sides has been most successful in attracting bluebirds (see accompanying directions from the Dahlem Environmental Education Center).

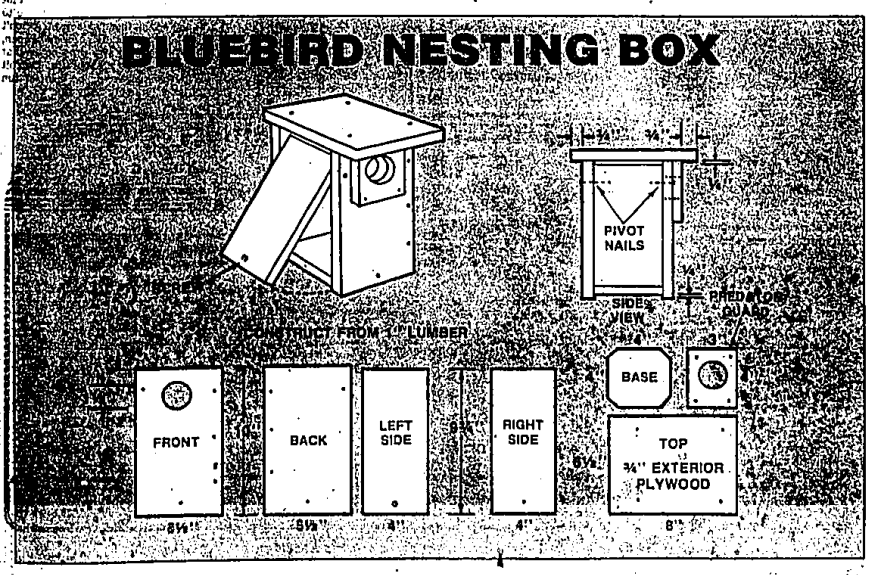
Trimming the corners of the floor allows for drainage of water, and an extra piece of wood over the entrance hole prevents raccoons from bending their forelegs into the nest cavity.

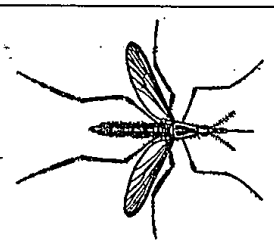
A hinged side or roof will allow easy maintenance of the box year round. Shortly before the new nesting begins in early to mid March, remove old nests of swallows, sparrows, mice or bluebirds.

After their first brood has left the nest, remove the nest. They can easily build another nest and raise a brood before fall if they choose to do so.

IT IS NOT necessary to paint the box, but if you do, be sure it is a light color other than white. White attracts house sparrows, and dark colors absorb too much heat.

Monitor the boxes periodically to see that everything is all right. Occasional disturbances will not cause the adults to desert. But most importantly, be sure to observe and watch these beautiful birds.





New mosquito is out for blood

By Neal Haldane
staff writer

A new pest could soon join the current crop of mosquitoes and flies that create havoc for outdoor enthusiasts and back-yard barbecuers in the warmer months.

And this new insect also brings with it an increased threat of disease transmission, according to Richard Parker of the Oakland County Health Department.

The insect is the Asian tiger mosquito, and its migration north has surprised many people, Parker said.

"It was only last March it was a novelty around Houston," he said. "We will be looking for it in Michigan this year."

Entomologists believe the mosquito came to the United States from Japan in a shipment of scrap tires, said Don Newson, an entomology specialist for the Michigan State University Cooperative Extension Service.

"Whether it will travel this far north is not yet known," Newson said. "In Asia, about the farthest north the tiger mosquito goes is the 40th parallel — about the same latitude as Columbus, Ohio."

Last summer, the mosquito was reported west of Columbus.

"THIS ONE comes from Japan and is well-adjusted to the north," Parker said. "It's likely it will be established in the extreme southern portion of the state. There also is a middle ground, but where that line will be drawn, no one knows."

The average temperature in January seems to be a key in determining if the mosquito will become a permanent inhabitant of the state, he said.

The insect can survive mean temperatures of 32 degrees in January but has trouble adapting to temperatures of 22 degrees or lower, Parker said.

The major worry surrounding this species is its ability to transmit disease, Parker said.

"This creature is an efficient vector of some diseases, such as yellow fever or dengue," diseases that are unlikely to survive in Michigan's colder climate, he said.

But the tiger mosquito also could be an efficient carrier of La Crosse encephalitis, Newson said.

Michigan's common mosquitoes, the Aedes triseriatus, carry La Crosse encephalitis. These insects tend to lay eggs in woodland areas away from man.

The virus is seldom transmitted to humans because these mosquitoes remain near these wooded areas, Newson said.

THE TIGER mosquito, however, has a much larger choice of breeding locations.

The mosquito will lay eggs in urban as well as wooded areas. And the insect also lays eggs a few at a time in a number of locations, thereby increasing its chances of survival and spread of the species.

If it can adapt to Michigan's climate and become infected with La Crosse encephalitis, the tiger mosquito has the ability to spread the virus in a much larger area.

But Parker said it is too early for the general population to worry about the mosquito.

"The potential is there for a number of diseases," Parker said. "No one has proven that it can or it will. This is a whole new environment for the mosquito. It may be of no consequence at all or it could become an established factor."